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FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF MY

SUBJECT: EMBASSY RAISES RELA ROLE WITH MALAYSIAN IMMIGRATION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Members of Malaysia's People's Volunteer Corps (RELA) began taking up guard duties at immigration detention centers beginning January 15, according to press reports. Government officials describe RELA's assignment as a stop-gap measure while responsibility for the immigration detention centers shifts from the Prison Department to the Immigration Department. Given RELA's poor reputation, Consular Chief raised questions about RELA's role with a senior Immigration official on January 22. In response, the official emphasized the temporary nature of RELA's assignment. Separately, RELA members reportedly raided two unsanctioned Burmese refugee camps over the past five days. We will continue to raise the issue of RELA with the Malaysian government and coordinate with UNHCR on refugee protection. End Summary.

¶2. (U) According to Malaysian press accounts, approximately 1,840 RELA members on January 15 began to take up duties as guards at immigration detention centers across Malaysia, with the exception of Sabah (due to Sabah's separate authority over immigration matters). Home Affairs Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad told reporters that by March RELA would be responsible for 13 detention centers. The GOM is shifting responsibility for the detention centers from the Prisons Department to the Immigration Department, both under the Home Affairs Ministry. As RELA gradually assumes its new role, it takes over from guards from the Prisons Department. Minister Radzi indicated that RELA's role would last approximately one year while the government hired 1,100 new Immigration guards. Government statements in November 2007 suggested RELA's role at detention centers could remain necessary for up to two years.

¶3. (SBU) RELA, a volunteer auxiliary security force under the Home Affairs Ministry, has attracted criticism for reported abuses by RELA members primarily when rounding up illegal immigrants. RELA members receive a bounty for each illegal immigrant detained. Largely untrained RELA members have been accused of stealing the belongings of suspected illegal immigrants, extortion, using unnecessary force, and mistakenly detaining foreign tourists and legal residents. Given the lack of recognition for refugees under Malaysian law, RELA also has targeted refugee communities for immigration round ups, drawing concern from the UNHCR among others.

¶4. (SBU) Embassy's Consular Chief called on Immigration Director General Wahid bin Md. Don on January 22 and raised questions concerning RELA's deployment to the detention centers. Consular chief noted that supervision of immigration detention facilities is a key government responsibility and Malaysia's handling of this function would attract international attention. Wahid responded that RELA's involvement at the detention centers represented a stop-gap

measure until the Immigration Department could recruit and train 1,100 new immigration enforcement officers to staff the centers. In the interim, Wahid emphasized that RELA members would provide only security and not overall management of the detention centers, and he stressed the temporary nature of RELA's new role. In addition, the government planned to hire another 3,000 new immigration enforcement officers to detect and detain illegal immigrants, implying that this would take away some pressure to use RELA in such a role.

¶5. (SBU) Separately, Embassy received reports and documentary evidence of a RELA raid on January 19 on a refugee camp in the jungle near Putrajaya. (Note: The GOM does not recognize or sanction any refugee camps. End Note.)

The camp contained about 75 Chin refugees, and had received prior warnings that it should disband. RELA reportedly burned the camp, and took or destroyed the refugees' belongings. The New Strait Times daily also reported the destruction of the camp, but stated that RELA Director-General Zaidon Asmuni denied RELA started the fires.

Instead, he pointed fingers at a local municipal council, whose president denied knowledge of the raid. (Note: RELA raids on camps sometimes occur following complaints by local residents or landowners. End Note.) The news report stated RELA detained 23 persons following the raid. Embassy also received a report of a RELA pre-dawn raid on January 23 on a second Burmese refugee jungle camp, which contained over 150 ethnic Chin. RELA reportedly detained 26 refugees, including a four-month old baby. Post forwarded the information to the UNHCR.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Post will continue to monitor actions by RELA and seek ways to impress upon the Malaysian government that RELA's treatment of refugees and illegal migrants will be a matter of U.S. and international attention. Post

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continues to coordinate closely with UNHCR on matters pertaining to refugee protection and, together with Refcoord Bangkok, facilitate UNHCR and U.S. refugee processing entities' access to refugees in immigration detention.

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